The Impact of Christianity - What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?

In this article, we offer an ***historical*** look at the importance of the Christianity—putting aside matters of theology or faith.

Christmas, of course, is to honor the birth of a humble itinerant rabbi from the ancient world. Emperors and governors have come and gone, but it is this man Jesus whose birth we still celebrate 2000 years later. We hope everyone can enjoy this account in the delightful spirit of Christmas.

Even most non-Christians at least respect Jesus as a great moral teacher. In addition, few would argue that this one man has had more impact on the world than any person in history. Putting aside the supernatural, let's examine how the person of Jesus impacted the course of history.

Most of the following material is from these books: (1) *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?* by D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, (2) *What's So Great About Christianity*, by Dinesh D'Souza, and (3) *Why You Think the Way You Do* by Glenn S. Sunshine.

"Christianity is responsible for the way our society is organized and for the way we currently live. So extensive is the Christian contribution to our laws, our economics, our politics, our arts, our calendar, our holidays, and our moral and cultural priorities that historian J. M. Robers writes in *The Triumph of the West*, 'We could none of us today be what we are if a handful of Jews nearly two thousand years ago had not believed that they had known a great teacher, seen him crucified, dead, and buried, and then rise again.'" (From the book *What's So Great about Christianity* by Dinesh D'Souza.)

Impact on the Value of Human Life

- ***Human Rights***. The concept of universal human rights and equality comes exclusively from the biblical idea that all people are created in the image of God.
- ***Women***. In ancient cultures, a wife was the property of her husband. Aristotle said that a woman was somewhere between a free man and a slave. According to the book *Reasons for God* by Tim Keller (page 249), "It was extremely common in the Greco-Roman world to throw out new female infants to die from exposure, because of the low status of women in society. The church forbade its members to do so. Greco-Roman society saw no value in an unmarried woman, and therefore it was illegal for a widow to go more than two years without remarrying. But Christianity was the first religion to not force widows to marry. They were supported financially and honored within the community so that they were not under great pressure to remarry if they didn't want to. Pagan widows lost all control of their husband's estate when they remarried, but the church allowed widows to maintain their husband's estate. Finally, Christians did not believe in cohabitation. If a Christian man wanted to live with a woman he had to marry her, and this gave women far greater security. Also, the pagan double standard of allowing married men to have extramarital sex and mistresses was forbidden. In all these ways Christian women enjoyed far greater security and equality than did women in the surrounding culture. See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*." In India, widows were voluntarily or involuntarily burned on their husbands' funeral pyres. Christian missionaries were a major influence in stopping these century-old practices and ideas. Also see Misconceptions item #13.

- ***Children***. In the ancient world, for example in classical Rome or Greece, infanticide was not only legal, it was applauded. Killing a Roman was murder, but it was commonly held in Rome that killing one's own children could be an act of beauty. Through a higher view of life, it was the early Christian church that ultimately brought an end to infanctide. The modern pro-life movement is largely Christian. This pro-life view has been true from the very beginning of Christianity. A Christian document called the Didache, dated from the late first century or early second century, contained instructions against abortion.
- ***Slavery***. While it is true that Christians have owned slaves in history, it is clear that this was a distortion of biblical teaching. (See Misconceptions, item #12.) Early Christianity elevated the roles of those oppressed in society, by for example, accepting women and slaves as full members. Slaves participated equally in worship and the community and were afforded contract and property rights. According to historian Glenn Sunshine in his book *Why You Think the Way You* do, "Christians were the first people in history to oppose slavery systematically. Early Christians purchased slaves in the markets simply to set them free." It is also true that slavery was ended in great measure by Christian activists. For example, historians credit the British evangelical William Wilberforce as the primary force behind the ending of the international slave trade (which happened prior to the American Civil War). Two-thirds of the members of the American abolition society in 1835 were Christian ministers.
- ***Gladiators***. A 5th century monk, Telemachus is credited as being the pivotal force ending the gladiator spectacles.
- ***Cannibalism***. Missionary followers of Jesus are credited with stopping cannibalism in many primitive societies.

Compassion and Mercy

Kennedy and Newcombe in their book detail the rise of charity in the name of Jesus over the centuries. This is in stark contrast to history before Jesus. Historians record that prior to Jesus, the ancient world left little trace of any organized charitable effort.

An important aspect of Jesus' ministry was his emphasis on helping the neediest and lowliest in society. For example, his Parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10:30-37*) is a classic illustration that is still part of our language today. While there are good charitable efforts outside of the name of Jesus, Kennedy and Newcombe argue that Christian charities stand out. They point to Mother Theresa, the Salvation Army, religious hospitals, and church supported soup kitchens and thrift shops in every community. Jesus has had such an enormous impact on charity that one wonders how different things would be if he had never been born.

D'Souza points out: "This is our culture's powerful emphasis on compassion, on helping the needy, and on alleviating distress even in distant places. If there is a huge famine or reports of genocide in Africa, most people in other cultures are unconcerned. As the Chinese proverb has it, 'the tears of strangers are only water.' But here in the West we rush to help....Part of the reason why we do this is because of our Christian assumptions....The ancient Greeks and Romans did not believe this. They held a view quite commonly held in other cultures today: yes, that is a problem, but it is not our problem....However paradoxical it seems, people who believed most strongly in the next world did the most to improve the situation of people living in this one."

The mythical character of Santa Claus points back to Christ. St. Nick unquestionably arose within the Christian tradition.

Marriage and Family

As explained by D'Souza, before the Chistian era, pederasty and homosexuality were not considered wrong: "Christianity exalted heterosexual monogamous love, which would provide the basis for a lasting and exclusive relationship between husband and wife, oriented toward the rearing of children. We take the family so much for granted—it remains such a powerful ideal in our society, even when actual family life falls short— that we forget the central premises on which it is based. Those premises were introduced by Christianity into a society to which they were completely foreign."

Education

From the beginning of Judaism, from which Christianity is derived, there was an emphasis on the written word. But the phenomenon of education for the masses has its roots in the Protestant Reformation.

In order to promote Bible literacy, Christians have been leaders in education. This trend was accelerated with the advent of the printing press at about the same time as the Protestant Reformation. Many of the world's languages were first set to writing by Christian missionaries in order for people to read the Bible.

In America, the first law to require education of the masses was passed by the Puritans. The law was called "THE OLD DELUDER SATAN ACT." This name was a reference to the devil, who Christians believe gets his foothold into people's lives because of their ignorance of Scripture.

For the first 200 years in America, children's reading texts emphasized biblical literacy. The emphasis on literacy was so intense in colonial America, that John Quincy Adams said in the early 1800's that the illiteracy rate was only $4/10^{th}$ of 1 percent. By comparison, it has been estimated that in America today, 40 million people are functionally illiterate.

All but one of the first 123 colleges in colonial America were Christian institutions. While these universities have lost their Christian identities, it is interesting to read the founding statements of these schools. Harvard, for example, was founded on this statement: *Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, John 17:3.*

Government of the People

While America's constitutional government is not specifically Christian, it can be argued that its roots are taken from biblical doctrines. Here are just a few possible arguments in this regard:

- America's first constitution was the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut. The Puritan framers of this document required that each aspect of it be grounded in Scripture. Other constitutions to follow contained many similarities to this one.
- At least 50 of the 55 signers of the U.S. Constitution were orthodox Christians.
- There is no doubt that the concept of our Constitutional checks and balances system is a direct result of the biblical doctrine of the sinfulness of mankind. All of our founders understood the importance of this doctrine to the social order.

- America's foundational idea of The Rule of Law rather than the authority of man traces back to the Old Testament, beginning with the Ten Commandments.
- The idea that all men are created equal as enshrined in the Declaration of Independence is a biblical doctrine.
- The notion of the sovereign authority of God (as mentioned in the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, all 50 state constitutions, our currency, etc.)--rather than the sovereignty of the state--is certainly biblical.
- The existence of moral absolutes (a biblical concept) is an important idea in our Declaration of Independence--specifically, *self-evident truths and unalienable rights from the Creator*.
- Many other aspects of our laws come directly from the Bible--for example the judicial, legislative and executive branches trace to Isaiah 33:22. Fair trials with witnesses have numerous Old and New Testament support.
- Regarding civil liberty, founding father John Adams (and others) emphasized 2 Corinthians 3:17 as the basis for American civil liberty. The slogan on the Liberty Bell is "Proclaim Liberty throughout the land unto all the Inhabitants Thereof" is from Leviticus 15:10. Kennedy and Newcombe argue that Jesus himself was the greatest civil libertarian of all time.

"Here we see, in its embryo, the idea of limited government. This idea derives from the Christian notion that the ruler's realm is circumscribed and there are limits beyond which he simply must not go....Our modern idea of limited government takes the Christian notion of space that is off-limits to state control and extends it to the whole private sphere....The separation of the realms should not be a weapon against Christianity; rather, it is a device supplied by Christianity to promote social peace, religious freedom, and a moral community. If we recovered the concept in its true sense, our society would be better off." (Dinesh S'Souza)

Note: See the other article on our site entitled The Bible and Government.

Science

Kennedy and Newcombe also argue that science has its roots in Christianity. They point out that other world religions may express a worldview of *fatalism* (everything is fatalistically determined) or of *illusion* (that the physical world is an illusion). Science could not have arisen from these worldviews.

Christianity on the other hand, is based on the notion that there exists a rational God who is the source of rational truth. This, they argue, gave rise to the possibility of scientific laws.

Evidence for this view is that nearly all the founders of modern science were Christians. These include men such as Keppler, Boyle, Pascal, Pasteur, Newton, etc.

Free Enterprise and the Work Ethic

Private property rights can be traced to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:15,17 (*Thou shalt not steal,? Thou shalt not covet.")* --as well as to other passages from the Old and New Testaments. Interestingly, there are over 700 references to money in the Bible!

It is noteworthy that Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was written in 1776, the same year as the birth of America. But many historians credit theologian John Calvin from 200 years earlier as the person who is most responsible for putting together the principles that were always in the Bible into a

system adapted by the American founders. For example, the biblical doctrines of *self-reliance* and *self-denial* are the foundation of the famous "Protestant work ethic." These doctrines are at the heart of our economic (and political) way of life.

A distinction can be made between ***biblical*** capitalism and ***evolutionary*** capitalism. The emphasis on biblical capitalism is on the importance of ***servanthood--***a key teaching of Jesus. Evolutionary capitalism, on the other hand, relies solely on the ***survival of the fittest***.

Anyone who doubts the relationship of biblical ideas to free enterprise need only to note the stark contrast with communism. Communism is specifically an ***atheistic*** system that relies on the non-biblical notion that all men are *good* (thus will work for the common good). But communism has been an abject economic failure.

As put by D'Spouza, "The system of modern capitalism arose in the West. To some it is surprising that capitalism developed so easily in conjunction with a Christian ethic. But capitalism satisfied the Christian demand for an institution that channels selfish human desire toward the betterment of society. Some critics accuse capitalism of being a selfish system, but the selfishness is not in capitalism—it is in human nature....While profit remains the final goal, entrepreneurs spend the better part of each day figuring out how better to serve the needs of their actual and potential customers. They are operationally, if not intentionally, altruistic....One may say that capitalism civilizes greed in much the same way that marriage civilizes lust."

Art, Music, Literature

The influence of Jesus on art, music, and literature is enormous. For example, the Christian faith has influenced literature in such Christian writers such as Dante, Chaucer, Donne, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Dickens, Milton, etc.

Had Jesus never been born, music would likely sound very different from what we're used to. There may never have developed the cantata, the concerto, or the symphony. Handel, Vivaldi, and Bach were Christians who worked to honor God with their work. Bach, for example, signed all his works with *Soli Deo Gloria* ("Solely to the glory of God").

Art has likewise been magnificently impacted by Jesus. While much modern art seems to debase the human spirit, classical Christian art tries to bring out the best of mankind--pointing us to a higher plane. This is certainly a tribute to Jesus.

And think of all the incredible architecture through the years. Especially noteworthy are the beautiful cathedrals in Europe.

Contrary Evidence

Kennedy and Newcombe address the criticism of some who point to atrocities in history committed in the name of Christianity—specifically the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem witch hunts, and anti-Semitism. The authors acknowledge the sinful nature of these events. But they argue that those who committed them were acting ***contrary*** to the teachings of Christ, who taught to love even your enemies! The blame for committing such acts should be placed on those who perverted Jesus' teachings—not at the feet of the Prince of Peace!

However, it should also be mentioned that many historians say that Christians have gotten a bad rap from the above events. For example, it can be said that all of the Crusades were defensive in nature—in the same way that one can accurately say that America's current War on Terrorism is defensive in nature. America is responding to an unprovoked attack first made upon us. Our goal in this war is simply to protect our citizens and our property. This is the same thing that the Christian Crusaders were doing, acting in self-defense against aggressors.

And in the case of the Inquisition, Kennedy has stated that he is convinced that the people leading the Inquisition were not Christians at all. "In every case in which Christians are blamed for violence, a closer look largely exonerates Christians."

Further, they point out that when Christian restraints have been removed from a society, the atrocities are magnified many times over. For example, the regimes of Hitler, Mao, Stalin, and Pol Pot were essentially atheistic bloodbaths. These twentieth century despots alone account for well over 100 million murders. The evidence is strong that when the restraining influence of Christianity has been removed from a country or culture, unmitigated disaster will naturally follow. As admitted by existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, "[Without God] all activities are equivalent."

Summary

An overarching theme given to the world by Christianity is the equality of human beings, and the preciousness and worth of every human life. As put by D'Souza, "This Christian idea was the propelling force behind the campaign to end slavery, the movement for democracy and popular self-government, and also the successful attempt to articulate an international doctrine of human rights. My celebration of Christianity's role in shaping these great social changes comes with a sober corollary: if the West gives up Christianity, it will also endanger the egalitarian values that Christianity brought into the world. The end of Christianity also means the systematic erosion of values like equal dignity and equal rights that both religious and secular people cherish." If securarlism continues to gain, so will the restoration of infanticide, demands for the radical redefinition of the family, the revival of eugenic (selective breeding) theories of human superiority, the suppression of freedoms of religion and expression, etc., as well as political tyranny.

The spirit of Christmas embodies many wonderful qualities—love, sharing, tolerance, hope, and peace. May the Christmas spirit be a positive influence in your life throughout the year.

Links:

Watch this debate: D'Souza vs. Shermer - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AR-rMWsNxTA

http://www.faithfacts.org/christ-and-the-culture/the-impact-of-christianity#impact